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DEPARTMENT OF STATE WASHINGTON DC OFFICE OF EXTERNAL--ETC F/G 5/4
SAUDI ARABIA: THE FLEXIBILITY OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM, (U)
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SAUDI ARABIA:
THE FLEXIBILITY OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

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SEP 81
Saudi Arabia has long provided the classic modern example of an Islamic state. The Saudis proudly proclaim and their history and practice seem to have confirmed its Islamic character.

Modern Saudi Arabia is a product of an alliance struck between an Islamic revivalist, Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab and a cunning prince, Muhammed ibn Saud, in central Arabia. Reformer and amir wedded spiritual vision and temporal ambition and produced a successful religio-political movement which the more religiously romantic saw as a recreation of Islam's seventh century beginnings. However, these early gains were reversed in the nineteenth century. It remained for Abd al-Aziz (1879-1953) to regain and to realize the family mission at the turn of the century. Once more, he combined military leadership with religious fervor and commitment. This time, it was the Ikhwan, groups of Bedouin fiercely committed to Islam and the muwahhidun (Wahhabi) goals and attracted by the lure of conquest and booty who provided his militia. Through force and ideological mobilization, the peninsula was once more united and by 1932 the kingdom of Saudi Arabia was proclaimed. The union of these twin forces is vividly symbolized in the Saudi flag which combines the confession of faith (shahada) ~~with the crossed swords of the Sauds.~~ with the crossed swords of the Sauds.

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Since that time, Islam has provided the ideological basis for Saudi rule and legitimacy. Of equal significance, it has been effectively utilized by Saudi rulers to validate their programs and policies.

From its beginning, the kingdom has appealed directly to Islam as its raison d'etre. Therein lies its strength and, perhaps increasingly, its vulnerability. If kingship is a questionable Islamic institution, then subservience of all, even the king, to the Shariah (Islamic law) is its legitimation. No need for a constitution; rather, the Quran and Shariah provide the basis and fundamental structure of the state, its law and judiciary. In fact, this policy has provided tremendous flexibility in those many areas not covered by the Quran and Shariah and shall be discussed shortly.

As might be expected from what has already been said, Islam has been used to validate government actions. For example, the ulama (religious scholars/leaders) advise and have input in the drafting of royal decrees. Their fatwas are sought to justify on Islamic principles important political actions from the transfer of power to Faysal in 1964 to the religious sanctioning of the government's actions in regaining control of the Grand Mosque in 1979.

Even where religious opposition to aspects of modernization has occurred, appeals to Islam have been utilized to win over the religious establishment and the masses. For example, Prophetic history and traditions concerning the employment of

non-Muslims during the early Islamic period were cited by Abd al-Aziz to justify the importing of oil technicians. Furthermore, Abd al-Aziz and Faysal advanced Islamic rationales in winning religious support for such innovations as radio, automobiles, TV and women's education.

Islam has also proved useful in Saudi foreign policy. Saudi emphasis on their role as protectors of the sacred sites (Mecca and Medina and by extension as leaders of the cause to liberate Jerusalem) has enhanced their prestige and leadership in the Muslim world. Faysal's appeals to a pan-Islamic scheme to counter Nasir's pan-Arabism, the founding and funding of international organizations such as the Muslim World League, and the Saudi role as protectors and patrons of other Islamic fundamentalists, such as the exiled leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, have further enhanced their image.

Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from the Saudi experience is that indeed even in a state which is ostensibly fundamentalist rather than reformist, Islam is flexible enough to permit, even legitimate, the development of a modern state. The use of the Quran instead of a formal constitution has allowed the royal family great leeway in most areas which are not covered by scripture. While Hanbali law is the strictest, most rigid of the Islamic law schools, yet where the written law is silent, change is indeed possible. Moreover, though clearly circumscribed, ijtihad (reinterpretation) has remained open to its jurists in principle. Finally, the history of Islamic

jurisprudence provides vast resources which a shrewd leadership has used in rendering change. A judicious use of ijtihad (independent reasoning or interpretation), takhayyur (selection), i.e., the right to select from varying teachings of accepted law schools, and appeals to "public interest or social welfare" (maslaha) provide means for substantive changes where the Quran and Sunna are silent.

Furthermore, while the Shariah is the law and thus human legislation is proscribed, yet Muslim governments have long had the power to enact rules and regulations (nizam) where the Shariah is silent. Indeed Islamic jurisprudence accepts the ability of rulers to enact administrative decrees in order to better assure Shariah governance (siyasa shariyya). Thus, for example, the Saudi government has been able to promulgate various codes such as: The Regulation On Commerce (1954), The Mining Code (1963), The Labor and Workman Law (1970), Social Insurance Law (1970) and The Civil Service Law (1971).

Saudi leaders have also found the rationale for changing and introducing new structures and institutions. Under the doctrine of takhsis al-qada, a three-tiered legal system permitting appeals beyond the Shariah courts has resulted. Taking its cue from the Abbasid, a Board of Grievances (Diwan al-Mazalim) was created in 1955 to hear complaints against government officials and the Ministry of Justice was substituted in 1971 for the office of Grand Mufti.

As can be seen, Islam has been used effectively by the Sauds to unite the peninsula, legitimate their rule, provide

a state structure and institutions, validate policies and justify change. However, although Islam has been sufficiently flexible to legitimate and validate Saudi rule and governance, yet it may prove long range to be a two-edge sword. A society forced to adjust in decades to the influx of vast wealth, rapid development, the presence of large numbers of expatriot workers, the rise of technocrats or a modernizing middle class and the strains and problems which issue from this process render the Saud rulers increasingly vulnerable to the very Islamic character and standards which they have carefully cultivated. While the group that ^{visited} ~~sees~~ the Grand Mosque in 1979 may itself be insignificant, some of its concerns (corruption and bribery, alcohol consumption and other "un-Islamic practices") are noteworthy. The well known and publicized examples of moral corruption and bribery among members of the royal family and other officials and influential businessmen is a matter of concern for many religious-minded Saudis and may become a matter for exploitation by other more secular and radical factions. The substantial salary increases to civil servants in the military and promises of the establishment of a more constitutional government show a concern to head off potential problems. The renewed emphasis on the Saudi commitment to change which is sensitive to, indeed rooted in traditional Islamic values, shows a recognition of the need to assuage those on the Islamic right who fear the spiritual and cultural ravages of rapid development.

A number of additional religio-political factors within Saudi Arabia today, whose presence and future influence is difficult to measure, may prove significant. As noted earlier, the Saudi government has provided a haven for exiled members of the Muslim Brotherhood and supported their writings as well as those of other Islamic fundamentalists such as Maulana Maududi. While they accept Saudi patronage, their understanding of Islam and their vision of a modern Islamic order is often quite at odds with the Saudi monarchy. This is especially evident in private conversations and even public statements made outside of Saudi Arabia. Thus, although some believe that the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamentalist groups are quietly supported in their work in countries like Egypt and Syria, in fact, Saudi policy towards these groups may boomerang.

More significantly, and yet equally difficult to accurately gauge, are a new generation of Islamic re-thinkers and Islamic associations. Often the leadership comes from Western-educated but Islamically-oriented university professors, technocrats and civil servants. While they espouse ⁵⁷dated regime goals, such as modernization and ~~continence~~ ^{continence} with Islamic values, many view the monarchy as un-Islamic and are critical of its concentration of wealth and power, as well as what they view as a state of serious moral decline. They receive encouragement and support from other like-minded reformers from Egypt to Malaysia with whom they are in regular contact both at the numerous Islamic meetings held in Saudi Arabia and at international gatherings outside the kingdom.

To what extent some members of the religious establishment might in the future join with other Islamically-oriented leaders/associations and disaffected elements of the "new middle class" in a popular opposition movement to an "un-Islamic monarchy" is now but a remote possibility which remains to be seen.

*The final copy of this report can be
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